Lee, Terence; Defect or defend: military responses to popular protests in authoritarian Asia

Terence Lee's *Defect or defend* compares two successful regime changes (Philippines and Indonesia) due to popular mobilization and defections within the armed forces, and two failed popular mobilizations (China and Burma), that failed due to a stronger version of authoritarianism ("power-sharing institutions").

The fundamental argument by the author is that the *type of authoritarian institutions* will decide the likelihood of military defections, and thus the outcome of popular mobilizations. *Personalistic regimes* tend to create defections, where *power-sharing regimes* do not. Personalistic regimes create winners and losers within their elite coalition, and there are few options for the promotion and mobility of those that fail to gain the support of the totalitarian ruler. These dissatisfied military officers look for opportunities to change their situation and a rebellion offers one such opportunity. However, a pact is required between discontented officers and the regime's opposition in order for the defections to become widespread. A pact ensures that enough defections are possible, and that the uprising will not be easily crushed by the military. Without an agreement, only small pockets of defections will occur, increasing the risk of of general instability, often resulting in civil war. The author focuses in the literature on how certain authoritarian regimes are more vulnerable to civil resistance, emphasizing the situations of the regime's military.

Questions asked include questioning why some officers seek change, and how a defection can be more than an individual choice and instead a part of a political process and alliance that affects the struggle's dynamic. Lee is generous in pointing out the weaknesses in his own study, an unusual and impressive way of lending credibility to a study with much academic potential limited both in scope and analysis.

The text does not look at any other factors besides military defection, which limits its theoretical scope. While every study needs to be focused in order to create a coherent analysis, there are some gaps that oversimplify the work. There is, for example, no real discussion on what role the different strategies of opposition have for facilitating (or limiting) the defections or outcome of the rebellion. Also, there is no discussion of the importance of political mobilization within the military. Furthermore, although authoritarian institutions are discussed in a refreshing, nuanced way, the typology between "personalistic" and "power-sharing" regimes is treated as dualistic, while it is arguably a continuum (with a broad range of elite coalitions and forms of sharing power). For example, Lee himself uses the expression "high personalism", which implicitly suggests that there exist "low personalism" and thus there exist degrees of how personalistic a regime may be. Therefore, the result of the study is a rather unmotivated determinism. Personalism correlates to military defection in the face of popular mobilization (since it serves as an opportunity for dissatisfied officers to escape), so the institution of a pact between the opposition and defecting officers will result in enduring protests and an eventual authoritarian collapse.

In the discussion of the explanatory potential of this defection model for cases of authoritarianism in Asia and elsewhere, Lee recognizes its mixed results. It seems to fit only in some cases. One of the possible explanations of the model's success in Tunisia and Egypt, (as opposed to its failure in Syria, Libya and Bahrain) has to do with the existence of ethnic or religious divisions created between the regime, its military and society at large. He has, however, no equally compelling explanations for the success of the uprising against the Thai military Junta in 1992 or the East European regime changes of 1989-90.

Even if we accept that the authoritarianism defection model suggested by Lee as generally correct, it seems as if different social cleavages

(such as ethnicity, religion, caste or region) threaten the defection-mechanism in ways that warrant further qualitative analysis. However, Lee does not take that further step.

Another step not taken is the failure to answer the obvious question of how an opposition could possibly *foster a shift* in the elite coalition that upholds a regime, irrespective of whether it is a personalistic or power-sharing regime. What new civil resistance strategies are necessary to make that possible? Assuming that power-sharing regimes also create dissatisfied elite groups, it seems possible to develop means of exploiting defections for the use of a wise oppositional movement. One indication resistance methods affect security forces is demonstrated in the research that shows activists can *decrease the levels* of repression. Binnendijk and Marovic has shown in their article "Power and persuasion: Nonviolent strategies to influence state security forces in Serbia (2000) and Ukraine (2004)" how creative tactics used by oppositional groups can "undermine the willingness of state security forces to engage in violent acts" against activists (*Communist and Post-Communist Studies,* 39 (2006), pp. 411-429).

Terence Lee's *Defect or defend* is clearly a contribution to our understanding of defection, particularly by relating defection to the type of authoritarian institutions. At the same time, the limitations of the study points to the need of larger comparative n-studies of military defection, and a combination of factors in such a comparison in order to find out what more than authoritarian institutions determine outcomes of popular mobilizations. To me it seems clear that Lee has detected one important part of the puzzle, but that the whole picture is still very unclear, and deals much more with *combination effects and dynamics* than what this study suggests.

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